

**AUGUSTUS VAN LIEW BROKAW**

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1863-1907



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THOSE of us who have been privileged to develop into surgeons of reputable standing must acknowledge a definite debt of gratitude to certain of our former elders in the profession. Our appreciation of their inspirational influence is cherished even after the purely technical knowledge taught by them has become more or less obsolete. Such is the impelling motive which led to the writing of this short biographical sketch.

Augustus V. L. Brokaw was born in the St. Louis City Hospital on April 6, 1863. His father, Dr. F. V. L. Brokaw, was at that time the resident superintendent and surgeon in charge of that institution, but resumed his private practice in the city a year or two thereafter and became a very successful physician.

The boy did not especially distinguish himself for being studious during the years of his preliminary education; yet, when he found his proper sphere in the study of medicine, applied himself so assiduously that he graduated with the highest honors in the Class of 1885, from the Missouri Medical College. Then according to the then approved procedure for embryo-doctors he spent about 2 years in the European surgical clinics. Still, the most forceful constructive factor of his career was encountered upon his return to the city of his nativity. There his locally influential father had arranged with Professor Theodore F. Prewitt to accept the son as an assistant of a preferential kind.

Dr. Prewitt was surgeon in chief to St. John's Hospital, and Brokaw soon demonstrated his ability to the several successive superiors and superintendents of that Roman Catholic Charity of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy. It took them but 4 or 5 years to recognize the superior talents of their junior surgeon. From then on, A. V. L. Brokaw was the surgical favorite of the hospital, because he had brought a wealth of surgical knowledge from Berlin and Vienna, which was greatly augmented by the daily association with Professor Prewitt, who was noted for his ability to teach and who had an abundance of clinical material at his service.

Meanwhile Brokaw was also demonstrator in anatomy at the Missouri Medical College under Professor Herman Tuholske, and succeeded the latter as professor of anatomy and operative surgery in 1891. In 1899, when this institution united with the St. Louis Medical College to become the Medical Department of Wash-

ington University, he took the chair of clinical surgery; and, when Dr. Prewitt retired in 1902, Dr. Brokaw was chosen surgeon in chief to St. John's Hospital, which was also affiliated with Washington University.

Then, in 1903, the St. Louis University established its School of Medicine by purchasing the Marion Sims-Beaumont Medical College, and immediately sought the assistance of several Roman Catholic hospitals in providing clinical instruction for its students. The control of the medical staff of St. John's Hospital was promptly and properly transferred to the administration of the newly acquired Jesuit school, and Dr. Brokaw accepted the chair of clinical and operative surgery in the St. Louis University Medical School and thereby remained at the hospital as its surgical chief. He retained these connections until he died suddenly 4 years thereafter, of a gastric hemorrhage, on January 25, 1907.

When the street railways of St. Louis were fused into one huge organization Dr. Brokaw had already functioned as surgeon for several independent street car lines; and, although still "in the thirties," he was appointed chief surgeon to the citywide transit system. A half dozen or more of his full time assistants were housed in the spacious office building attached to his residence, first at Compton Avenue and Washington Boulevard, and later in more commodious quarters on Taylor Avenue. By day and night some of these were always ready to answer emergency calls. Then, too, there were scores of privately practicing physicians distributed throughout the area of St. Louis who had been appointed for part time duty. On the whole, this corps was quite efficient.

Brokaw installed an X-ray apparatus almost immediately after he saw Professor Charles O. Curtman first demonstrate the new discovery of Professor Roentgen in Professor Nipher's laboratory at Washington University in 1896. He foresaw its great value to medicine, and especially to industrial and traumatic surgery. On account of the frequent changes and improvements in the early models of coils and tubes he was kept busy discarding various pieces of apparatus and replacing them with others of greater efficiency. His name should be inscribed high up on the honor roll of pioneer roentgenologists.

A. V. L. Brokaw was a stickler in asepsis, by enforcing thorough heat sterilization of surgical instruments, linens, etc., to obtain an aseptic operative field at a time when most surgeons were still indifferent or careless in such matters. These precautions, coupled with the confidence in his own dexterity with a scalpel and his extensive knowledge in anatomy, are responsible for many recoveries which might have terminated otherwise. He had many admirers among the younger physicians, and was a popular consultant and operator with them.

Sometimes brusque and apparently blunt in demeanor, our subject was decidedly cordial and communicative to whomever he trusted and respected, even if that individual was his junior by many years. In his private work, as well as in his corporate practice, the question of remuneration was always secondary



to the aim to give everybody the utmost quantity and degree of service. Among the makers of medical history in 1935, some of his pupils and assistants are still diffusing the inculcated spirit of this short lived master who displayed a domineering attitude over his surroundings, which had the semblance of a small empire, and in which he played the rôle of supreme ruler. Nevertheless, in true regal fashion, he always assumed the full legal and moral responsibility for all personal acts, as well as those of every subordinate person in his service.

Removed as he was by death at the early age of not quite 44 years, it cannot be expected of him to leave a long literary record of his achievements and experiences. Thus Brokaw's published writings are comparatively few, but they are characteristic and reflect his progressive boldness of opinion on the important surgical problems at the end of the nineteenth and during the early years of the twentieth century.







